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SUBJECT: OLD/NEW STATE ISLAMIC UNIV. RECTORS ON ISLAM AND SOCIETY

REF: 03 JAKARTA 9773 -- ISLAMIC COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITIES IN INDONESIA

Classified By: Political Officer Catherine E. Sweet, Reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) Summary. On November 8, Komaruddin Hidayat, the new rector of the State Islamic University's (UIN) Syarif Hidayatullah campus, and former rector Azyumardi Azra spoke to us about the university, Islam and society. They argued that Indonesia is becoming increasingly conservative religiously as a result of the instability that emerged after Suharto's fall, with radical Muslim groups taking advantage of economic, political and legal vacuums that exist under Indonesia's new democratic system. To Komaruddin, this suggests that the radical Islamic movement is more psychological than philosophical. Both envision a special role for UIN in training Muslim leaders who can cooperate with all nations, and they called for even greater cooperation between the university and the U.S. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On November 8, we paid a courtesy call on Komaruddin Hidayat, the new rector of the State Islamic University's Syarif Hidayatullah campus, and Azyumardi Azra, whom Hidayat is replacing. Hidayat was elected in October to a four-year term as rector. Azra, who is also a history professor, has served a rector since 1998. (Note. Azra participated in a roundtable discussion with President Bush during his 2003 visit to Bali; Hidayat is scheduled to meet President Bush during his upcoming visit on November 20. A/S Hughes spoke at UIN during her 2005 trip to Indonesia. End Note.)

¶3. (U) The Syarif Hidayatullah campus is the flagship institution within the State Islamic University (UIN) network, with more than 23,000 undergraduate and graduate students. According to Azra, students hail from throughout Indonesia, making UIN's population even more geographically diverse than the prestigious University of Indonesia. Instruction is primarily in Indonesian, although some courses are offered in English and Arabic, and the majority of students major in the humanities or social sciences. Unlike in Indonesia's secular universities, UIN has a faculty of religious studies and offers a major in Islamic studies. However, UIN teaches "universal principles" in secular disciplines -- there is no "Islamic" curriculum for the hard sciences, for example. UIN faculty are heavily involved in activities outside of UIN: more than 50 lecturers teach at other universities, others have ties to Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), and many are active within civil society organizations.

Relations with the U.S.

¶4. (SBU) UIN has long-standing strong ties with the Embassy, and hosts an American Corner; at present, there are two visiting American faculty members. According to Komaruddin, there is still much misunderstanding within Indonesian society about the U.S. He said many ordinary Indonesians do not differentiate between the political and economic/cultural aspects of the country's relationship with the U.S., which makes life difficult for defenders of the U.S. Extremist organizations like Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) exploit this ignorance, accusing people like Azra and Komaruddin of being "agents of the U.S." or part of a "Zionist agenda."

¶5. (SBU) When asked if it would be useful for the Embassy to engage with these groups, both Komaruddin and Azra said it would if it were done through bridge institutions like UIN. He noted that UIN students and lecturers are from conservative areas, and can act as conduits to civil society. Azra suggested that the Embassy help schedule regular public lectures (by experts or diplomats) at the university on politics, American society, and religion in America.

Radical Students Groups Weak on UIN Campus

¶6. (SBU) Azra and Komaruddin told us that the vast majority of UIN students are affiliated with the independent Islamic Student Association (HMI) or the unions tied to Indonesia's two biggest mass Muslim organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah; all three are moderate, mainstream associations. They indicated that there is a smaller group

associated with the Lembaga Dakwah Kampus, a university-based proselytization organization that gave rise to the Indonesian Muslim Student Action Union (the student wing of the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party, PKS), as well as a handful of students who belong to the radical Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI). Interestingly, the rectors believe that secular universities (notably the University of Indonesia and the Bogor Agricultural University) are the bastions of hardline Islamist student groups, not the Islamic university system.

Indonesian Islam: More Conservative under Democracy

¶7. (SBU) Azra believes that Indonesia is becoming increasingly conservative religiously. He attributed this to the social, political and economic instability that followed Suharto's fall and the end of authoritarianism. According to Azra, the country "has not reached equilibrium after democratic euphoria." Because politicians have been unable to establish law and order, a legal vacuum has emerged that groups like the vigilante FPI have filled by taking the law into their own hands. Komaruddin added that unlike in the Suharto era, when the state could forcibly suppress radical religious movements, Indonesia is not yet a sufficiently mature democracy to regulate and balance against these groups. Furthermore, some of the more extremist organizations do not want to be part of the state system; they have become even more radicalized on the periphery.

¶8. (SBU) Azra said that the best way to manage such groups is through economic progress. He blamed Indonesia's rampant unemployment for creating an atmosphere in which extremists may easily recruit supporters (although he added that their overall membership is still quite small and fairly constant).

Azra observed that Indonesia has been fairly impervious to foreign attempts to export radicalism (noting specifically Iranian efforts to spread revolutionary Shi'ism in the 1980s). However, he said that transnational radical organizations like HTI could gain momentum if Indonesia's democratic experiment fails.

¶9. (C) As academics, both Azra and Komaruddin were critical

of radical groups' lack of intellectual rigor. For instance, Azra recounted his conversations with members of HTI, whom he clearly disdains. He said he challenged them about their calls for a return of the Islamic caliphate, pointing out that the Ottoman caliphate was an exceedingly corrupt institution that was more of a monarchy than a religious exemplar. Komaruddin agreed with Azra's critique, adding that movements which use Islam to promote their agenda have been neither consistent nor pragmatic. Rather, he believes they are cathartic movements designed to channel frustration with ineffective secular governments. For their adherents, Islam has become the most effective way to express their grievances. At base, Komaruddin argued, the radical Islamic movement is more psychological than philosophical, drawing on an internal anger that derives from a lack of political and economic confidence.

UIN's Role in Combatting Radicalism

¶10. (SBU) In this regard, both Azra and Komaruddin see a special role for UIN: producing Muslim leaders with first-rate academic training who retain strong ties to the community. They said UIN has a responsibility to teach Muslims that they can cooperate with any institution or country, and pointed out that UIN established the American Corner for precisely this reason: to show that this Islamic institution could engage with the U.S. Both Komaruddin and Azra called for even greater cooperation between the university and the U.S. In addition to organizing lectures and seminars by U.S. officials and academics, they suggested a joint effort to translate American academic materials into Indonesian, which UIN could then distribute to its students and to Islamic boarding schools, or pesantren, in conservative communities.

Bio Notes

¶11. (U) Komaruddin Hidayat is an Islamic philosophy professor who was previously the dean of UIN's graduate school faculty. He received his Ph.D. in philosophy from Middle East University in Ankara, Turkey. Hidayat has previously served as the Director of Tertiary Education in the Ministry of Religion, and as the chief of the 2004 Elections Observer Committee.

¶12. (U) Azyumardi Azra, one of Indonesia's most prolific Muslim scholars, has long ties with the U.S. He received his M.A. in Middle Eastern Languages (as a Fulbright scholar) and a Ph.D. in history from Columbia University. In 2001, Azra returned to the U.S. as a Distinguished International Visiting Professor in New York University's Middle East Studies program. He has been part of the State Islamic University network since 1985, first as a lecturer, then as UIN's Vice Rector for Academic Affairs (1997-1998), and finally as Rector (1998-2006).

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